

Dreams in Surinamese Amerindian Cosmology

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Introduction

Dreams play an important role in Surinamese Amerindian life. Dreams or rather dream sharing forms an important element in this oral tradition where people enjoy story telling for entertainment. Dreams also have a function in the transference of traditional knowledge, or change traditional customs. Dreams may also help in coming to terms with major life cycle events and in taking difficult decisions in life. Here, I will focus on the function of dreams occurring in major events in life such as death. [1]

‘Dreams prepare your emotions’, is one of the main comments that I frequently heard during my research in Kari’na and Arawak villages in the coastal area of Suriname (2001, 2004). This statement reaches to the heart of the function of dreams during important changes in the lives of Kari’na and Arawak peoples in Suriname (as well as of many of these people who migrated to the Netherlands). For this genre of dreams, I have coined the term, *Rêves de Passage* (dreams of passage), to characterize the distinct nature of these dreams (Mohkamsing-den Boer 1998, Mohkamsing-den Boer & Zock 2004). This term is not only useful for easy reference for a specific category of dreams, but as such helpful in eventually analysing these kinds of dreams from a relational point of view. It should be clear that in coining the term, I have consciously adapted Van Gennep’s (1909) *Rites de Passage* and Róheim’s (1945) notion ‘Mythe de Passage’ in *The Eternal Ones of the Dream*. From object relations theory I have taken Winnicott’s theory on transitional phenomena into account (1971); *Rêves de Passage* refers not only to the individual psychological value of these dreams as events accompanying social changes, but also to their function for individuals as transitional phenomena facilitating those transitions. [2]

Despite the importance of dreams, not much research has been done in this field. In this article I will get into the Amerindian notions on dreams and the relation of dreams to the cosmology and give some examples of the role the dreams play in daily life.¹[3]

The Indigenous People of Suriname

Suriname is also known as one of the five Guyanas,² and has a small indigenous population. The country is located in the lowlands of Amazonia and has almost 500,000 inhabitants of which about 3.7% belong to one of the indigenous groups, and of whom around 60% live in indigenous villages.³ Both the north and the south of Suriname are inhabited mainly by Amerindians belonging to the Carib linguistic family, to which the Kari’na in the north and the Trio, Wayana, Akuriyo, and a handful of Sikiyana and Tunayana in the south belong. Both the Lokono or Arawak of the coastal region and a few Mawayana in the south belong to the Arawak linguistic units (Carlin & Boven, 2002: 37), Warau does not belong to these specified language groups. [4]

The Lokono or Arawak⁴ community is spread over the north of the country. Only a few of the elder generation speak the Lokono language.⁵ Along with this decline in the number of speakers, stories, traditions and rituals also disappear rapidly. Literature on this group in Suriname is scarce.⁶ Apart from linguistics, almost nothing is known about behavior and cosmology. For some regions and many indigenous inhabitants of Suriname it seems already too late to change this situation, especially for the Sikiyana, Tunayana and Mawayana in Suriname who are virtually on the edge of extinction. Of the Sikiyana and Tunayana around 15 individuals are left, the last handful of present Mawayana are the last survivors of this group in Suriname. The southern indigenous people lived in a fairly isolated way until the 1970s when an airstrip was constructed. Until then their traditional way of living had remained almost unaffected by western lifestyle. In the past three decades about 80-90% of these southern indigenous people have converted to Christianity.⁷[5]

The present similarities between the culture and cosmology of the different indigenous groups in the coastal area are striking and justify a general approach to their cosmology. Rivière (1987: 303) also argued “that the myths of the Amazonian Indians incorporate many identical components that have roughly similar meanings, but the way in which any particular group combines them is idiosyncratic; this idiosyncrasy being the expression of the group’s social and cultural uniqueness”.⁸ Similarly, there are differences and resemblances between the southern and the northern regions. [6]

Indigenous Concepts of Dreaming

In indigenous Suriname, the meaning and function of dreams is usually defined through the conceptions of the spirit world. To understand the value and function of the dreams, I first make a survey of the conceptions of the spirit world and the way the indigenous people relate to their environment. I noticed that knowledge of these subjects is usually passed down through story telling,⁹ dreams or through dream-connected stories. Van Kempen (2002: 144) observes that music, singing, dance and song texts are usually one inseparable whole, embedded in ritual or festive events. I have observed that these form one whole with the mythology, thus showing how in the traditional worldview nothing exists independently in itself. [7]

Openness on personal matters does not mean that one also has immediate access to the private world of cosmology. This can be the exclusive area of the religious specialist, the *piyai*. More specifically, only the initiated *piyai* has the knowledge of and entrance to this secret and virtually mythical realm. [8]

It is with reference to this world that we need to understand the socio-cultural place of dreams and the role dreams play in cosmology and social life. Depending from which perspective one approaches dreams, there are as many ideas on what a dream is and how it functions. Sociological, psychological, religious, or other approaches (in one or more combinations) offer different solutions. On the direct connection between daily life on the one hand, and cosmology and dreams on the other, the anthropologist Magana (1989: 137) writes that myths, proverbs, ordinary sayings, etc., as well as implements, farming

the land and all kinds of acts in society are part of the cosmology, and are thus retraceable in daily life. [9]

There exist different ideas on what a dream is and what happens when a person is dreaming, also in an Amerindian context. The earliest records suggest a relationship between dreams and important psychological and eschatological processes. The soul leaves the body during sleep and accordingly both falling asleep and awakening are dangerous transitions. De Goeje (1943: 7), for example, reports that according to the Kari'na:

Sleep is temporarily death. During sleep the soul leaves the body: it issues from an opening in the skull as small as a pin-prick. When we awake the harmony of times flashes through the awakening brain as a dream and in its turn is formed into thought and speech. Dreams mostly are vague memories of former lives, forming the life-cycle. To awaken somebody is dangerous; the soul might not return. [10]

Jara (1990: 314) also refers to the relationship between dreaming and death among the Akuriyo of Suriname: "Death is conceived as a journey through the world of dreams from which there is no return." Among the Kari'na and Arawak, I have found some evidence of the idea of the soul leaving the body during sleep, as people insist that a person has to be awakened very carefully or better not at all. I have also found some evidence of memories of former lives, however this is a subject that requires more research. On dreams De Goeje (1943: 7) remarks that according to the Kari'na:

the soul or part of the soul (aka-ri) resides in the head. When a person is asleep the nature-spirit (yurokon) comes, takes hold of the aks-ri and drags it into the wood; and that is the dream. [...] When the aka-ri has been taken away by a bad spirit, the person grows mad or weak. [11]

He continues with this idea on the nature of dreams: "The Indian considers dreams as real happenings or as a prophecy or a hint as to what he is to do" (1943: 8). This comes very close to what I found: the belief in the portentous capacity of dreams.¹⁰ Many dreams are interpreted as premonitions about death, health, social relations (such as change or disruption) and availability of game, mediated by dream.¹¹ [12]

Dreams were and are highly valued, and as already Nimuendaju (1914: 46), a Brazilian of German descent, who was accepted as a member of a tribe of Guaranis, writes about this Brazilian Amazonians: "Who dreams, knows and can do much more, than who doesn't dream, therefore the medicine men cultivate the dreams as an important source of their knowledge and power".¹² About the Sipaias he writes: "The source of the entire wisdom of the medicine men is dreams" (1919: xiv).¹³ [13]

Since the early days of colonization the indigenous people of the coastal area have been subjected to missionary activities. As a consequence, the majority have adopted the

Christian faith, i.e. Roman Catholic or EBG (Evangelische Broeder Gemeente, Evangelical Brethren Community).¹⁴ Besides the strong Christian influences, there are strong Creole and Maroon influences as well as from the beginning of slavery in Suriname there was interaction with escaped slaves. Hence, the Kari'na and Arawak conceive part of their cultural heritage as typically indigenous, but also recognize many Christian and Creole influences. In particular, the rites and ceremonies related to initiation, death and mourning rituals are conceived in essence as their own heritage however with recognition of the non-Amerindian elements, which are plenty in the Suriname's multi-ethnic society.¹⁵ This same idea of recognition of influences is found in notions of the visible and invisible world. [14]

An interesting challenge that faces us now is how to understand and translate the indigenous cosmology into a comprehensible terminology. In the past the invented patterns of understanding proved to be impracticable, as the world cannot be divided simply into 'natural' and 'supernatural' categories when speaking about spiritual life. In particular, the people of the Amazon do not themselves conceive these spirits in those terms.¹⁶[15]

On the one hand, spirits form a part of daily reality, and the spirit world is an extension of the visible, social world, though 'distinct yet not separate'.¹⁷ According to indigenous informants, both the spirit and the animal societies do not differ much from human society, and are considered equal (Vernooij 1993: 13). Or, as Boven (1998: 15) observes among the Wayana, "spirits are considered different by the Wayana, but are just as real as, for example, Americans." Animals are called inhabitants of the forest and the indigenous people inhabitants of the villages, which have a relation of exchange. Notably, both groups, humans and animal, are structured socially in a strikingly similar way; both have village heads, called grandfather, and religious specialists (Magana 1989: 139; Jara 1990: 172). The animal *piyai* communicates with men mainly through dreams and the interpretation, sometimes with the help of a *piyai*, determines what the dream will do during the day (Magana 1989: 141).¹⁸ On the other hand, a distinction is clearly discernible in the Cariban languages. Whenever somebody or something from the spirit world is referred to, the related noun gets the suffix '-me'. A Trio example of this is:

wītoto nērë
Human. being he
He is a human being

wītoto-me
nērë
Human. being-FACS [facsimile] he
He's manifestly a human being (he is a human being but not
inherently so,
he's a facsimile human) (Carlin 2002: 50) [16]

Århem (1993) called this aspect in Amerindian cosmology "perspectival quality: the conception, common to many peoples of the continent, according to which the world is

inhabited by different sorts of subjects or persons, human and non-human, which apprehend reality from distinct points of view”.¹⁹ Rivière (1994) speaks of ‘What You See Is Not Necessarily What You Get’ in Amazonia. Not everything is as it seems to be, the transformational nature is part of reality and appearances can be deceptive: “The body serves only as a cover or ‘dress’ for the free soul”.²⁰ Malajuwara (1998: 63) claims of the Surinamese Kari’na that the soul is the energy that provides life, this energy originates from the Origin, *Tamusi*, and therefore equal to the Origin, thus every living being is pervaded by energy from the same source. [17]

Dreams and Cosmology

Mircea Eliade (1958: 128) believed that religion, rite and dream are connected, and that initiation appears less often in ritual performances than it does in dreams. “But”, he observes, “there is yet more: the imaginative activity and the dream experiences of modern men continue to be pervaded by religious symbols, figures, and themes. As some psychologists delight in repeating, the unconscious is religious.” Grimes (2000: 101) elaborates this notion when saying that “in dreams, fantasies, psychotherapy, and the arts, we stumble unwittingly through initiation patterns.” This process is probably often indeed unwitting. However, in some cultures such as those of the Surinamese indigenous people, these patterns are accompanied by rites and the associated dreams may appear to be noticed and even treasured as forming part of the transition, as has already been noted by Róheim (1943). [18]

Dreams with religious or rather cosmological and ritual elements are here the main focus. To avoid confusion I prefer the term ‘cosmology’ instead of ‘religion’ in the Amerindian case, because in these societies the sacred and profane belong to ‘distinct yet not separated’ areas.²¹ Nature and the mechanism of the universe are connected and interrelated in every possible way, including human beings and all other creatures, as Mathews (1994: 12)²² recognizes:

[A]cosmology serves to orient a community to its world, in the sense that it defines, for the community in question, the place of humankind in the cosmic scheme of things. Such cosmic orientation tells the members of the community, in the broadest possible terms, who they are and where they stand in relation to the rest of creation. [19]

My preference for the term cosmology instead of religion in the Amerindian cultures is based on their cosmogonies, as the body of the stories, myths, and theories relating to the origin of the universe, and of human beings (Bowie 2000, p. 119). In this regard it is useful to make a distinction between cosmologies which are based on the idea of creation of the universe *ex nihilo*, such as we find in the Thora, and creation of the universe out of something (already existing), for example as found in Australian Aboriginal and Hindu cosmogony. In the former there is no natural bond between God and nature, for God did not share any of His substance or body with nature; so nature is not ‘iconically’

connected with God. In the latter cosmology, however, the pervasiveness of the spiritual or the divine is one of the features of religion, which means that there is a natural bridge between God and the created universe.²³ I similarly perceive Descola's (1994: 1) attempt to deal with "the conceptions of the world presented as mutually exclusive: the one sees nature as an animate twin of society, the other conceives it as the set of phenomena occurring outside the realm of human action." In Surinamese Amerindian thinking the former notion is dominant. The physical environment determines and affects human life in general and particularly in the Surinamese Amerindian culture. Reichel-Dolmatoff (1996: 9) in studying the Tukano of Colombia observes:

So if you see an Indian walking in the forest or paddling a canoe on a river, he is not 'in nature' but he is entirely surrounded by cultural meanings, by meanings his cultural tradition has given to his external surroundings. [20]

This relationship is applied consciously in culture and cosmology. The relationship between the human and spirit world as created through the notion of creation out of something, at least in the Amazonian cases, leads to environmental cosmologies. These can be defined as "cosmologies in which the interdependence of human life and the ecosystems that sustain them are made conscious and are embodied at the level of myth, ritual, language, and lifestyle" (Bowie 2000: 141). The conception of the cosmos in Amazonian thinking is accordingly "non-human centred and non-hierarchical – all parts of the natural and supernatural world are equal, contain moral agency and are sentient" (cf. Strang 1997: 238). The sacredness of living things and their connections is central in (inter)action and thinking.²⁴ Borsboom (2003: 82) attributes certain qualities to the religions of the most remote parts of Australia, which shows that the term 'cosmology' is indeed appropriate, as in those societies it penetrates into all realms, this can be compared to Amazonian life: it is esoteric (religious in the Western sense of the word), epistemological (it contains a theory of knowledge), and social (expressing and imposing moral codes of behavior). To which I add psychological as it forms and affects the self. [21]

I take the presumed natural bond between the spiritual and physical environment as one of the starting points in the application of object relations theory. To have contact with and to relate to the environment and the spirit world (conceived as interrelated and inseparable), dreams, besides rituals, are considered to play an important regulating and transmitting role. The importance and function of dreams cannot be separated from the cosmology since much of their origin, meaning and function is rooted in the mythology, from which in earlier days many dream symbols have developed. [22]

Rêve de Passage

Dreams, like rites and myths, comprise one of the ways in which the self is realized in the object-world, and take place in the transitional space. Considering this with the theories described above, I now come to the following description of *rêve de passage*. The concept of *rêve de passage* (dream of passage) indicates that this kind of dreams

accompanies (major) changes in life, such as birth/parenthood, initiation, marriage, death, and enables individuals to facilitate, or to cope with these transitions with the help of cultural or religious images. This implies that a) like rituals and myths, dreams can have a transitional function, b) that they can support important changes in life and c) that in the dreams, social and religious meanings drawn from the cultural environment may be creatively appropriated. [23]

Another approach to dreams of passage is to analyze them as having a triple layer of meaning. The first layer, which is always present, concerns the personal situation of the dreamer and the individual consequences of the dream. The second layer shows the spiritual importance of the dreams which the dreamer believes to be connected with the spirit world. The third layer, which is not always present, concerns the community; it refers to the cultural and religious background and implies social consequences of the dream for (a part of) the community. Referring to Victor Turner's concept of 'social drama' (1974 [1969]: 37) it appears that in cases of social crisis, dreams can play a role in solving a crisis within a kin group or community. [24]

The dream process shows similarities with initiation rites, for example, in its tripartite structure. The first phase is separation: by falling asleep the dreamer is literally separated from the active, external world into another (altered) state of consciousness, and enters into the internal, private realm of the dream-space. Next, there is the dream as the liminal phase entailing information about the transition (the new situation). In the rite this is the period in which, for instance, the initiate is placed symbolically 'outside the society.' During sleep and dream, the dreamer is also temporarily in a comparable situation. Finally, the dreamer awakes and re-enters society, and by remembering and eventually sharing the dream incorporates the contents or message of the dream into one's life and into society. The sequence, *entrée – victime – sortie*, proposed by Hubert and Mauss for studying specific forms of sacrifice ([1898] 1954: 19-50), could well serve as an example of Van Genne p's rites of passage. Lincoln's shift of terminology proves useful for the diversity in transitions in the life cycle, and thus the accompanying dreams: the dream process aids in rounding off a certain period or occasion in one's life and looking for enclosure. The actual dream (transitional period) magnifies the event and emotions, stimulating change/metamorphosis and incorporation. Mostly incorporation of changes in life are not spectacular, but sometimes they indeed manifest themselves as "emerging from the chrysalis" (Lincoln 1981). [25]

The (generally metaphorical) change of status is of main importance in both models. In the function of dreams in changing status and facilitating change, time plays another role, viz. that of the time span between dreaming, sharing and change which is variable, from a short period to a very long period of even years. This is one of the reasons why the aspect of dream sharing is of such importance. [26]

A transitional dream contains cultural and/or religious elements. Many dream images or symbols seem ordinary, but they are part of the culture, which is inseparable from religious life. These apparently ordinary symbols (such as a brand new hut or losing teeth are Amerindian symbols for death) can be placed in the framework of the transitional

dream, as they are culturally defined. Also in the case of the Arawak and Kari'na, symbolism is deeply rooted in the culture, even if the original link between the symbol and the religious meaning often seems to have been lost. These people have been converts to Christianity²⁵ for generations. Some of the elder generation refer to those stuck to their 'authentic' cultural ways as pagans in fear of clerical sanction, but nevertheless follow the traditional system. [27]

Medicinal Plants

As mentioned above concerning the Guaranis and the Sipaias, some Amerindians acknowledge the value of dreams for their medicine men, in particular in the field of medicinal plants. The *piyaikon* claim that they learn about plants during their apprenticeship from a teacher, and significantly through dreams. Plants appear in their dreams, and a proper reaction to them leads to knowledge that comes directly from the spirit of the plant itself. This is contrary to ordinary people who will usually tell how they learned it only from their parents and grandparents. [28]

As for their healing capacity, the plants should not be taken for granted; they should only be picked when needed, used in the proper way and thanked for their help, otherwise the spirits will withdraw and cease to transfer knowledge. Without exception all Amerindians in Suriname with whom I spoke and who work with medicinal plants, emphasize that they obtain their knowledge mainly through dreams. [29]

The following case, underlines the link between *piyai* and medicinal plants. Years ago, I met a woman who struggled with the question as to whether she should allow herself to be initiated as a *piyai*, a religious specialist. She was born and raised in a Kari'na village, but was now living in the capital. She told me how not long after the demise of her maternal grandfather (around 1999), she visited her aunt who lives in a Kari'na village in French Guyana. At the end of this visit her aunt offered her cuttings of medicinal plants. This aunt was aware of her interest and love for her own indigenous culture, religion and practices, and thus assumed that these cuttings would be appreciated and cared for in the appropriate way. Customarily these plants should not be given away but should be 'stolen' by the one who intends to use them. Asking for them is therefore 'senseless.' So the option that remains is the culturally accepted way of obtaining the plants without explicit permission, viz. by stealing them. She however was offered them by her aunt although without asking for them. Now, she recalls the consequences:

When returning home I planted the herbs in the garden of my house in Paramaribo. The cuttings grew beautifully. However I neglected them without ever utilising them. Then I started to dream. I dreamt of the plants; all their leaves were on a big heap and my husband placed in the middle, naked. This dream returned day after day for a while. The dream was scary and disturbing, I hardly slept and felt completely out of balance. I felt how the

*spirits of the plants had travelled with the cuttings and now visited my sleep. I felt as if these spirits were killing me.*²⁶[30]

After this disturbing dream she phoned her sister as she is used to do. Her sister told her that she should start using the plants. The dreamer asked her how, and her sister answered to start with offerings and *wassie's*, the Creole term for ritual purifying baths. The spirits of the plants had come along with the cuttings and wanted to be utilized. Since they were neglected, they started visiting the receiver of the cuttings in her dreams. All this scared her so much that she finally decided to remove the plants. However the plants and dreams still returned, the plants appeared indestructible and unstoppable and the dreams kept returning. Then she spoke to the plants 'I cannot use you *yet*, but I do find you beautiful!' After she had said so the dreams stopped. She concludes her story with the words that it is therefore better to steal plants because then you may actually use them without necessarily caring for the plants and their spirits. [31]

In the other dreams this lady recognized, for example, her deceased grandfather, who was once a powerful *piyai*. These dreams are not just powerful for the one who dreams, but also important for the community as by this the people of the community will know that there is a direct communication between an individual and the spiritual world. Such a dream or series of dreams involve the individual, the society and the spiritual world (three layers as mentioned above). The sanctity of the spirits of the plants is obviously violated; here we recognize the notion that the reality of the dream is not experienced very differently from the reality of waking life. And it is this direct communication with the spiritual world that gives dreams an authorizing character, not only in matters of the religious specialist but also for communal affairs, for instance in solving conflicts, in this case, the inner conflict as well: should she be initiated as *piyai* or not? Becoming a *piyai* is a drastic change in life. Eventually, her transformation to *piyai* will become complete with the help of her dreams. In the dreams, as in the liminal period of initiation rites, preparations for the metamorphosis and the transition towards the realm of the religious specialist appear to be made. When she separates herself from the waking world, in her sleep and dreams, she meets her spiritual mentors in the dream-space, who have separated from the spirit world to 'teach' her. Every time on awakening after such a dream her consideration of becoming a religious specialist grows and becomes more convincing. The dreamer feels how the dreams guide her, and give her strength to emerge finally from her doubts into being a traditional *piyai*. Hence, her dreams can be qualified as transitional phenomena: facilitating a (major) transition in her life and stimulating maturation. [32]

Portentous Dreams and Death

Dreams of a predictive nature are very common in Amerindian society. These dreams are experienced as particularly valuable. Dreams around death are especially of great importance. The Arawak and Kari'na of the coastal area of Suriname freely share dreams which have portentous elements, with relatives, the elderly and others considered knowledgeable and trustworthy. This relative openness provides an opportunity to study

the dreams and to check the contents against later events. For example, some years ago, I visited the Arawak village Pikin Powakka for the first time. It was on a social occasion when I accompanied a friend who had not seen her aunt for a long time. Since my friend did not have a means of transport of her own, she had asked me to drive her to the village. Her aunt, a Kari'na married to an Arawak man, was curious about me and wanted to know what I was doing in Suriname. After informing her about my research, she almost immediately came up with the following dream: "For a few days I have had a recurring dream. Every night I dream that deceased relatives, dressed in white clothes, dance in my yard and call me." Then she looked at me and asked: "What does this dream mean?" I replied that she herself knows what it means. With this evasive reply I referred to her own knowledge of dream symbolism. About two months later I heard from her niece that a few weeks after my visit, her mother, about 85 years old, had announced that she would soon leave for Coppenamepunt, her place of birth. She had requested her relatives not to bring her back under any circumstances. Shortly after her arrival at Coppenamepunt, she had a cerebral hemorrhage and slipped into a coma. Despite her strong request to be left in Coppenamepunt, she was brought back to her daughter in Pikin Powakka as there were no relatives to take care of her at Coppenamepunt. Soon after her return she died. [33]

In the Arawak village of Cassipora, one of the male elders shared a similar dream with me. "My father," he said, "worked as a watchman and died three months ago. Before his death, I first dreamt that a new small slash-and-burn garden was being prepared. Then in my dream I saw a hut around which many people were running. I woke up in shock and thought 'my father is ill, I must go to him, maybe he has died'." After a short silence he recounted a second dream: "In a dream some days later I saw a sunset and heard a bell chiming. The week after [the dream] my father died." He explained that the hut he saw in his first dream symbolizes the place where the deceased are placed on the bier and that the garden referred to the graveyard. His explanations on his second dream were similarly direct, the sunset is the end of the day and thus symbolizes the end of life. The chiming of the church bell is an omen of death as well as it literally refers to the chiming of the village church bell upon the passing away of one of the villagers. The people he saw running around were the ones who were already buried there. He finished with the remark that as a gravedigger he did not fear death. [34]

Since most Amerindian people, including the Arawak and Kari'na, draw on a substantial repertoire of dream symbols, cultural expectation plays a role. In fact, people are expected to have certain dreams on important occasions, here transitions. Through the dream the 'crisis' is recognized, and gives immediate cause to start acting out. Thus for these dreamers it is clear what the dreams mean and to whom they refer: their own parents' approaching death. They seem prepared to face one of the most fundamental life-crises, viz. the loss of a parent. The parents of the dreamers in the above cases were both of advanced age, in their eighties, and their health was deteriorating fast. [35]

In these dreams these images are clear. In the first dream the dancing in the yard refers to traditions from the past as well as from the present. In the past indigenous people of Suriname buried their dead in their own huts or yard, followed by dancing on and near

the burial place. Nowadays the burying takes place in the graveyard but the dancing is still done in the camp of the deceased. The white clothes of the dancers reveal the syncretistic element as it is reminiscent of the Catholic custom of burying people in a white shroud. [36]

In the second dream the elder recognizes 'clearing a new slash-and-burn garden' as an omen of death. The running around of people can refer to the hectic situation that arises immediately after someone's death when the villagers are informed and hurry to the camp of the deceased, or to the dancing at the mourning rites. His second dream was only a confirmation for him of what he already knew: the sunset as the end of the day symbolizes the end of a life. In his opinion the tolling of a (church) bell can only refer to death; as explained above, upon death the church bell is tolled to inform the villagers of someone's death.²⁷[37]

However, can these dreams offer any help in coping with and accepting the inevitable loss, namely that of their parents with whom they have lived their entire life? Customarily, Amerindians take care of their aging parents. In such a close relationship it is not strange to recognize the omen of death at least unconsciously. As stated above, dreams have strong authoritative features, and particularly in cases of death the communication with the spiritual world through the dream enforces this. In the dream contact with the spiritual world is experienced and the dream images of deceased relatives have been recognized as omens of death. The dreamers felt worried but they also felt that 'these dreams prepare you emotionally for what is coming, you can prepare yourself.' The aunt used the exact words many others had uttered in the same circumstances: "the dream prepares your emotions," and with these words demonstrates the acceptance of the inevitable. Inevitable because the spiritual world had spoken. [38]

Considering the above mentioned tripartite structure, if the element of *revelation* is present in this dream, it may be better to speak of a prediction. In both dreams neither *secrecy* nor *sacredness* are found; the dreams belong to the personal, private realm and are therefore only shared and discussed with certain people fit for this task, and not for reasons of secrecy. [39]

The presence of the tripartite structure in all the dreams for both the dreamer and the ancestral spirits are quite clear. The dreamers first separate themselves from the outer world in the dream-space of their inner world (as an altered state of consciousness). Here they encounter the spirits of deceased fellow-villagers. These ancestral spirits²⁸ greet the relative, and the bereaved, i.e. the dreamer and others in this world, will find comfort in the reunification in the yonder world. From their dancing and jumping on a yard the dreamers recognize the omen of death. When they awake, they are able to integrate this knowledge in their lives by preparing themselves for the predicted loss. The ancestral spirits also separate themselves temporarily from their own world into the dream-space of the dreamers; here they temporarily transform to be visible for the dreamer and pass on their message and welcome a relative, after which they withdraw and re-enter their own world. Thus it is shown that the individual and spiritual structure of transition and layers of meaning are strongly connected: the spiritual and individual meanings cannot be

separated; while the dreamer has to say goodbye to a relative, the ancestors welcome their relative. With this coinciding, the message proves it has come from the spirit world and should thus be accepted. The bond with the spirit world is (again) confirmed through the dream. [40]

Dream symbols in relation to death are almost innumerable. They are connected to traditional Amerindian culture and religion and to Christianity. For many the meaning is still known, but its traditional roots are lost. I asked some elderly men to describe the contemporary customs of burial and *aity dey* (ritual of the eight day after death). [41]

Immediately after someone's death the church bell is tolled; in villages without a church bell the traditional custom is followed: death is immediately made known by loud screaming and wailing, thus attracting the villagers who would immediately assemble at the camp of the deceased. Here they will stay during the first night. Relatives in other villages are warned, mostly through the radio transmitter. [42]

In the old days when someone died the deceased was laid on a bier, made of two kraka's – these are Y-shaped sticks – and cross beams. The feet pointed to the east. Therefore we never lay babies to sleep in this direction. Nowadays the corpse is laid on a bench or placed in one's own hammock, with the head pointed to the north and a little raised. During the night the body is bathed, dressed in new clothes and tied up. The hands are crossed and the jaw tied up with a little piece of cloth. The mouth has to be tied up well because when it opens the spirit can return! First the body is put a little bit out of sight behind a screen, then the family take their places and keep watch over the dead body the whole night. All the time there should be someone with the body, otherwise there will be big problems: "When I was alive, you were with me, and now I'm dead you are afraid to sit with me?" [43]

Close relatives will sit quietly, although from time to time the women will burst out in wailing. Others spend the night dancing, singing, drinking and sometimes playing cards. People wear old clothes. The songs are partly prescribed mourning songs, partly improvisations on the life of the deceased. This goes on for the entire night. At dawn people return to their own camps. [44]

If someone is Roman Catholic people sing songs from the church, talk and drink coffee. Here there is only singing, not dancing, and drinking coffee, faya watra, to stay awake. The body cannot stay longer than 24 hours; it has to be buried quickly. Nowadays one has to hurry to the doctor for a death certificate, then find a coffin, a shroud:

many things to do. In the old days everybody would stay together and sit until the eighth day, now only till the funeral. Nowadays people gather again on the eighth day, aity dey; only family members will come and visit in between. From the first day until aity dey, a candle is lit every day at 4.00 p.m. This will burn until sunrise. Men have to shave and cut their hair in a particular way; women only symbolically cut a lock of their hair. Men cut men's hair, women women's hair. The one who cuts the hair drinks liquor before he or she starts, so there is a big chance they will easily get drunk. [45]

On aity dey, at 7.00 p.m. the mourners assemble in the hut of the deceased and at 8.00 p.m. the 'pastor' (usually the schoolteacher) arrives, and then there is a service until 10.00 p.m. From midnight people start with the storytelling that lasts till 3 a.m. In Cassipora we sing and tell both Arawak and Anansi stories (stories). Of course, there are cantors or head singers but others are free to jump in, and a sad song can easily change into a merry or even festive or funny song. Only the men are allowed to sing. These stories are to comfort and cheer up the family members. Coffee, bread and biscuits are served at regular periods. Everything is mostly drunk in cups.²⁹ There is also liquor, now mostly cassiri (traditional light alcoholic drink made of cassava) because other liquor is too expensive. You have to drink the cassiri until you vomit; everything that you ate and drank with the deceased has to come out. Why? because it is our culture, all the aggravating things in relation to the deceased have to come out! You drink, you are forced to drink until you vomit. You don't get drunk, because everything comes out, all the bad things; it is purifying. [46]

Depending on the family ties the conclusion of mourning takes place after 6 weeks, 6 months or 12 months; this we call 'pura blakka' [Sranang, lit. 'pulling out of black', i.e. removing the dark, mourning.³⁰]. But these things, like the sixth week, sixie weekie, come from the Carib, but now, we Arawak do it as well. This in fact is a repetition of aity dey but during that night people also dance and drink cassiri. Until the termination of the mourning period relatives are not allowed to dance and wear red clothes [red is the festive colour]. On the eighth day after someone has died his or her clothes/belongings will be burnt and the hut or house abandoned or even demolished. Nowadays the Amerindian villages have a graveyard, like other villages, but in earlier days people were usually buried in their own hut or yard, and where the dancing also actually took place. [47]

In this account we can recognize many of the metaphoric links as described in the list of dream symbols below. Particularly images in dreams that are connected with old collapsing huts or newly built camps, anything that could be similar to a coffin such as a car, boat or even airplane. These dreams have a very strong impact and these abodes of death even cross the Atlantic Ocean. Many Surinamese Amerindians live in the Netherlands, through these dreams they know when family members are ill or have died. It is not unusual that after such an arousing dream they will phone to Suriname to have the contents of their dreams confirmed. [48]

Conclusion

The result of a dream can be practical and can relate to the social group and group interrelationships. Ultimately symbolic images only make sense if they are translatable into a number of meaningful individual, social and cultural spheres (such as the different layers of meaning and the tripartite structure of dreams). The guides on the road towards understanding are the elders and religious specialists of a community, who carefully distribute their knowledge at the appropriate times. Through dreams, individuals are liable to acquire knowledge and power. Hence, dreams constitute an important source of knowledge. This can be experienced directly or indirectly: directly as messages from the spirit world, indirectly as a starting point for discussions or explanations which generate knowledge. In this regard, sharing dreams serves different purposes as well. Through the narrative it becomes a social event. Dreams can be employed to conserve and strengthen the existing order or induce innovation and change within both the social and religious context, using the authorizing capacities of dreams. Altogether, dreams of passage – as true *rêves de passage* – provide means to engage socially, culturally and cosmologically. Thus for the dreamers dreams prepare emotions and facilitate crises. [49]

Currently there is a notable interest in and research into religious specialists and medical plants from the tropical rainforests.³¹ Presently, the *piyai* and plants are almost inextricably linked, for instance, the International Day of Indigenous People opens in Suriname with *piyai* prayers and a ritual bath.³² [50]

It is strongly believed that the plants reveal their curing powers through dreams. More research in the field of the *piyai* and his/her practice in relations with dreams is needed for more insight into these matters. Certain dreams influence waking reality in the same way as experiences and activities of waking reality, not only in the religious domain, but dreams also have strong authoritative feature in the personal and social domain. And it are these characteristics that make that people can accept the comforting elements from dreams (and of the socio-cultural and cosmological environment) in case of major changes in life or loss of relatives or friends. [51]

Dreams play an important role in the preservation of culture and traditions, particularly in the field of the religious specialist. Through dream telling knowledge in all kind of fields is passed on to new generations. Hence, as long people tell their dreams and listen to their spiritual world, the culture will stay alive and practiced. [52]

Table: Examples of Dream Symbols

(Note that this should not be conceived as a rigid system with static rules, as the dreamer is free for other interpretations)

Subject of Dream	Metaphorical Link	General meaning	Area ¹
Fish	Fertility ²	Pregnancy/ 'you will have a lot of children'	Arawak
Krobia or kwikwi	Small and oval (vagina-like) shaped fish	Pregnancy ³ of a girl	Kari'na female, but also a man may incidentally have such a dream
Pataka or Logologo like fish	Long (penis-like) shaped fish	Pregnancy of a boy	Kari'na, female, but also a man may incidentally have such a dream
Angling for big fish	Fish	Pregnancy	Kari'na
Dolphin	Seduction (by water spirit) ⁴	Girl's dawning sexuality	Kari'na (living near the coast)
Cleaning cassava, fish, meat	Female duties/tasks	Pregnancy of a girl	Arawak
Picking and spinning cotton	Female duties/tasks	Pregnancy of a girl	Arawak
Building a new hut	A young man, wanting to live together with a girl, first has to built a new hut for his spouse-to-be	Finding a spouse	Arawak, Kari'na, adolescent boy
Buying a gun	Shoot game for his father-in-law and wife-to-be	Marriage	Arawak, Kari'na
Collecting mango	Mango as symbol for testicles	Find a spouse, have sex or catch game	Arawak, Kari'na
Erotic acts		Catch game, especially female	Arawak, Kari'na
Pricked on fishhook or needle	Teeth	Big change of being bitten by snake in the forest	Arawak
Water up to the knees	Water	Heavy rain ⁵ or bad omen	Kari'na*
Water	Drowning	Death	Kari'na
Crying	Water	Rain	Arawak
Crying	Laughing	Good sign	Kari'na

Death or funeral rites	Belief in contradictions	Very good sign	Kari'na
Own death	Belief in contradictions	A long life for yourself	Arawak
Angling for big fish	Scale of fish = coins/money	Wealth	Arawak
Stuffing yourself with food	Greed, contradictions	Always remain hungry	Kari'na
Visiting the lavatory		Becoming rich or someone will make you feel ashamed	Arawak, Kari'na
Brother, sister or good friend arriving drunk	Funeral rites when people drink and sing	Omen of serious illness or death	Arawak, Kari'na
Fire		Quarrel or fight	Arawak, Kari'na
Tigri (Jaguar, Leopard)	Danger	People gossip about you or are after you	Arawak, Kari'na
Land tortoise	Wisdom, seriousness, kindness	Good omen in general	Kari'na
Sea turtle ⁶	Bad spirit of the river/sea	Bad omen	Kari'na
A man		Bad omen	Kari'na
A deer	Jumping to and fro/jumpy	Bad omen	Kari'na
Funeral, everybody beautifully dressed in white and grieving, flowers on the grave	Burial celebration, belief in contradictions.	Your life is going in a good direction; after rain [burial] there is sunshine [happiness]	Arawak, Kari'na
Thunder	Reminds one of the sound when soil is thrown on the coffin	Bad omen, something goes wrong	Arawak, Kari'na
Eggs		Trouble	Kari'na
Taking your picture	ditto	Someone is running after you to destroy your life	Arawak
Losing incisor	Sign of decay	Death of own child	Arawak, Kari'na*
Losing all teeth	Sign of decay	Death of an elder person	Arawak, Kari'na
New hut/camp/house not entered	Until Christian conversion the deceased used to be	Omen of death or illness	Arawak, Kari'na *

	buried in the old hut and people would dance on the grave		
New hut collapsing and rebuilt	ditto	Omen of death of a family member	Arawak, Kari'na
Broken down hut	ditto	Omen of death	Arawak, Kari'na ⁷
Leaky hut	coffin	Omen of death	Kari'na
Banana tree with fruit on a deserted slash-and-burn-garden		Death of one of the children	Kari'na male
Broken stairs	decay	Omen of death	Kari'na
Loosing a shoe	loss	Omen of loss (or death) of partner	Arawak, Kari'na
Deceased family members dancing dressed in white	facet of mourning ritual	Omen of death of close family member/parent/partner/self	Arawak, Kari'na
Laughing	Release of emotions, is also crying. Symbolises the noise made after someone's decease.	Omen of death of a family member or close friend	Arawak, Kari'na*
Cooking	Food for the journey to the other world	Death	Kari'na
Big party in your own house/camp	Post burial celebration	Omen of death within one month	Arawak, Kari'na*
Brother, sister or good friend arriving drunk	Drinking cassiri at the final mourning rite	Omen of death or serious illness	Arawak, Kari'na
Dancing of family members	Mourning ritual	Omen of death	Arawak, Kari'na*
Setting sun	End of the day: end of life	Omen of death	Arawak
New slash-and-burn-garden	Graveyard	Omen of death	Arawak, Kari'na
Sun and rain	Laughter and crying	Omen of death of a distant family member	Arawak
Open space	Graveyard	Omen of death	Arawak

Notations:

1 When marked * the symbol is also found among the Saramaccan (of the Maroon groups in Suriname).

2 Cf. Tastevin 1914, p. 417; Kunike 1912, p. 229.

3 Not only dreams refer to pregnancy; one should also notice other indications of pregnancy, as Granny Fotto of Bigi Poika recounted, 'When the moon is full, and you see the bird, who we Kari'na call *buta*, who flaps its wings, take a bath in the sand, for sure a girl will be born, and if this same bird makes the sound 'kring kring' for sure a boy will be born'.

4 Cf. Tastevin 1914, p. 414.

5 Being mostly dependent on agriculture, hunting and fishing for their daily living, being able to 'predict' rain is important for the right time to plant and harvest.

6 Only for areas where these animals live, such as Galibi.

7 Kracke also found this among the Kagwahiv.

Notes

[1.](#) The research was funded by the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (WOTRO).

[2.](#) Also known as the Guyana shield, part of five nations: Suriname, French Guyana, Guyana, Venezuela and Brazil, i.e. the area bordered by the Atlantic Ocean in the north, the Orinico river in the east, and the Amazon river in the west.

[3.](#) Census 2004, ABS 2005.

[4.](#) Until recently it was assumed that the Arawak became established around 500 AD in the coastal areas of Surinam as the first peoples to live sedentarily in Suriname. However recent archaeological research places this under scrutiny and this new research may lead to the conclusion that Suriname may be inhabited for 10.000 years. The Arawak were a semi-nomadic people who lived in small groups of around 20 people. The Arawak not only differ in language, but were known as a peaceful people, contrary to the Kari'na who were seen upon as fierce warriors, and believed to be cannibals up to a century ago. The Arawak themselves find evidence of this in their own culture, such as their songs and dances which are peaceful, expressing the beauty of their surroundings, while the songs and dances are said to be much more directed towards war and hunting. However, Penard and Penard (1907-1908) also include more peaceful songs and dances in their studies of the Kari'na.

[5.](#) The decrease of the number of people speaking Lokono was accelerated during the recent domestic war (1986-1992), as most felt it was more convenient to adapt to the Surinamese lingua franca Sranan as the government at the time discouraged the use of their own language. There are a number of Arawak people who refer to themselves as Lokono.

[6.](#) For the other Guyanas there is more literature on the Arawak, for instance Hill and Santos-Granero (eds., 2002).

[7.](#) Census 2004, ABS 2005.

[8.](#) The dynamics in cosmology are obviously related to the individualism and independence of the people. Kloos mentions that individuals change and embellish ideas; he cites Chagnon (1969, p.4) 'In Yanomamö society is place for thinkers'. According to Kloos (1974, p. 26), this statement refers probably to many indigenous societies.

[9.](#) For an overview on oral literature of the indigenous people of Suriname, see Van

Kempen 2002, pp.133-187.

[10.](#) Cf. Ahlbrinck 1931, p.339; Penard & Penard 1907, p. 229

[11.](#) Cf. Kracke on the Kagwahiv: 'dreams would be interpreted in terms of predictions about game or health, mediated by traditional dream symbols, 1981, p. 261; cf. Gregor on the Mehinaku, an Arawak-speaking people of Central Brazil, 1981, p. 354

[12.](#) Cited in De Goeje 1943, p. 2.

[13.](#) Cited in De Goeje 1943, p. 2.

[14.](#) For an overview of Christian missionary activities among the Amerindians in Suriname, see Jabini 2004, p. 38-54.

[15.](#) Suriname (a former Dutch colony) is a multi-ethnic society where the descendants of the British Indian laborers (known as Hindustani's) constitute the largest ethnic community, followed by the Creoles and the Maroons. The other communities are Jews, *boeroes* ('farmers', descendants from Dutch colonists and farmers), Javanese, Chinese, Lebanese. Nowadays the Brazilian community is increasing very fast, whereas a new wave of Chinese migration is also noticeable.

[16.](#) For continuation on this subject I refer to Platvoet's (2004) discussion 'Does God have a Body? On the Materiality of Akan Spirituality'.

[17.](#) With this I refer to Ter Haar & Ellis' notion (2004, p. 14) 'that religion refers to a belief in the existence of an invisible world, *distinct but not separate* from the visible one, that is home to spiritual beings with effective powers over the material world'.

[18.](#) These kinds of dreams should not be discussed openly which constitutes the only restriction on the communication of dreams.

[19.](#) Cited from Viveiros de Castro 1998, p. 469.

[20.](#) Several authors on the Amazon Amerindians give these or similar descriptions about the soul and the transformational body, for example, Rivière 1994, p. 256; Baer & Langdon 1992, p. 81; Frikel 1971, p. 139, n.16. Descola (1994, p. 93) explains this as follows: 'In mythical times, nature's being had a human appearance too, and only their name contained the idea of what they would later become'.

[21.](#) I use the singular 'cosmology' as a collective name, acknowledging that a general statement on Surinamese Amerindian belief systems cannot be made as they are too various and subtle, and professional insight is not complete. However, with regard to style I use the word religious(ly) in terms of adverb/adjective. [22.](#) Cited in Bowie 2000, p. 119.

[23.](#) Cf. Tambiah 1990, p.6.

[24.](#) In this regard the discussion on the similarity with other religions and philosophies of life such as Hinduism, Buddhism, neo-Paganism, New-Age, etc. would be interesting, leading Rappaport (1979), for instance, to the notion of adaptive and maladaptive or dysfunctional cosmologies.

[25.](#) Mainly Roman Catholic and the Protestant Evangelical Brethren Community *Evangelische Broeder Gemeenschap*, and nowadays a lot of small evangelical and charismatic congregations try to increase their numbers in Suriname and in particular in the indigenous villages.

[26.](#) The idea of becoming ill when the messages of spirits in dreams are neglected is quite common. A lady from the Arawak village Powakka, converted to Christianity, is known as being regularly visited by the spirits of a healing stone, which she inherited from her father. However, she threw the stone in the Suriname river as she did not want to use the

stone. Now it is believed by some of her relatives that the stone wants to be put into practice and speaks through her dreams. She does not want to know about these practices but every time after the dreams she gets high fever and feels severely ill for a few days.

[27.](#) During the domestic war the bell of the church of Cassipora was brought down and not replaced. Hence presently when someone dies, people inform each other. The tolling of a church bell is not a typical Amerindian symbol of death, but in, for instance, Europe as well.

[28.](#) By ancestral spirits is meant all (family members) who have died, not only the direct lineage ancestors.

[29.](#) Disposable white cups irrespective of the language used, Sranang, Dutch or Lokono.

[30.](#) Dutch is the official language of Suriname, Sranang the lingua franca.

[31.](#) For example, Plotkin's research institution The Shaman's Apprentice program, the ACT (Amazon Conservation Team) and CI (Conservation International) in this field in Suriname. Besides research Plotkin has started a so-called 'shaman's school' where indigenous youngsters can again obtain knowledge in the field of the traditional medicinal plants.

[32.](#) In 1993 the United Nations have declared August 9 as the International Day of Indigenous People, resolution no. 49/214. Since 2001 this day is celebrated in Suriname as the National Day of Indigenous People and from 2003 as a holiday, in 2006 the Surinamese government has decided to declare August 9 a permanent National Holiday.

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